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THE INFLUENCE OF CHARLES DARWIN UPON HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL THOUGHT.

BY PRESIDENT ARTHUR TWINING HADLEY,
Yale University.

The preliminary work which needed to be done before people could apply Darwinian methods in history was not so great as the corresponding work which had to be done in biology. When Darwin presented the doctrine of evolution by natural selection to the zoölogists and botanists, he had to deal with men who for the most part did not believe in evolution of any kind. They had been brought up to regard different species as having an independent existence. The idea of development of types by slow processes of change was something new and foreign to their minds. In history or in politics the case was different. These sciences are based on a fundamental assumption of an evolutionary doctrine. If different historical events were independent of one another there would be no sense in writing history at all. All serious investigators in this field, from Thucydides and Aristotle down to the present time, have sought either to develop the details of this orderly and gradual evolution or to lay down the principles of its operation. The man who to-day reads the *Politics* of Aristotle for the first time will be struck by the prevalence of methods of thought which many biologists suppose Darwin to have invented. And the same idea of evolution thus used by Aristotle has been applied in varying forms by all who sought to develop a philosophy of history — by Hegel and his followers in Germany or by men of the type of Henry Thomas Buckle in England.

Not only was the idea of evolution thus familiar to the historians; the idea of natural selection was also prominent in the

minds of many of them. The whole doctrine of John Stuart Mill concerning liberty was founded upon reliance on a process of natural selection. Look for your hero in all possible directions, he said, and you get the best chance of finding him. The issue between Mill and Carlyle reminds one of the controversies between Darwinian and anti-Darwinian in the field of biology. Carlyle believed in the special creation of a number of individual heroes ; Mill, together with nearly all scientifically trained historians, believed in the evolution of heroes by natural selection.

The conception of economic or political conflict as a means of determining the survival of the fittest was seen perhaps even more conspicuously in Malthus's theory of population — a theory which Darwin himself regarded as having in some respects foreshadowed his own work. Malthus made it a fundamental basis of his doctrine that population tended to outrun subsistence ; that the struggle for existence was a constant process of elimination of the weak ; and that any attempt to interfere with this process resulted rather in the deterioration than in the improvement of the peoples that it was designed to benefit.

If then the idea of evolution had been a fundamental one in historical and political science for more than two thousand years, and if the idea of elimination by natural selection was by no means unfamiliar to political thinkers, what was there left for Darwin to do in this field?

He found at least two things to do. In the first place, he showed how natural selection was a means of developing, not only individuals of superior ability or intelligence, but types of superior adaptation to their surroundings ; and he taught us further to regard this adaptation of the type to its surroundings as the thing which gave it its right to exist.

The first of these points is well illustrated by the history of the Malthusian theory before and after Darwin. Malthus and almost all the Malthusians before the time of Darwin talked of an actual struggle for food between different individuals. They thought that there was not enough food to go round, and that this fact was a direct means of keeping workers up to a certain standard of efficiency and prudence by the direct elimination of

the weak. To-day we see that the result is far more indirect than this. There is, in civilized communities at least, no habitual scarcity of food. This has been avoided by the development of certain institutions like the family and private property and certain motives which go with those institutions which prevent the scarcity that would otherwise exist. A generation ago the critics of Malthus thought that the non-existence of the scarcity disproved the Malthusian theory. To-day we see that it confirms it. It shows that the type has adapted itself to its environment.

It is the institution even more than the man that has been marked out for survival by the process of natural selection. We have known for generations how elimination affected the development of individuals. It was Darwin who taught us to account in this way for the growth of species—in history as well as in biology. And in thus accounting for the origin and growth of institutions, he furnished for the first time an objective justification of the ethical standards and motives by which those institutions were upheld. Every prominent political thinker before Darwin, with the one notable exception of Edmund Burke, referred historical events to some preconceived ethical standard of his own, and judged them to be good or bad according as they conformed to his preconceived ideas. This is true even of a man like John Stuart Mill. He had great natural love of liberty, and was essentially tolerant in his disposition. Yet one can feel in all his work the underlying assumption that the chief reason for approving of liberty is its effect in developing the type of character represented by the liberal and tolerant Englishman of the nineteenth century.

This attitude of mind was a great help to Mill in arranging a coherent system of political economy; and as long as he addressed an audience whose general views and general standards were like his own, it enabled him to appeal to them with great force. But the instant he was brought face to face with a protectionist like Carey or a socialist like Lassalle, what had previously been an element of strength became an element of weakness. There was no common ground from which to reason, and no means of finding any. It was Darwin who furnished the common ground. It was Darwin who gave the judgments

of historians and of political thinkers the possibility of reaching objective results which were previously unattainable. You like one kind of man and one kind of institution ; I like another kind of man or another kind of institution. Very well ; let us set to work to discover which, in the long run, is going to prevail over the other. That which will prevail in the long run must be right. This is for the historian the center and gist of Darwinism. We all assumed that orderly evolution existed ; we most of us understood a good deal about a process of natural selection which was going on. But none of us until Darwin came had learned to take the results of natural selection as a standard ; to make the fact of permanence the test of the right to remain ; to assume the view of the philosophical pragmatist in dealing with the problems that came before us.

Of course this is a doctrine that needs to be applied with great care. The frank acceptance of survival as a test of right is attended with the great danger that we may take too short periods of history under our observation, and may think that an idea or an institution has won the race when it is riding most hurriedly toward its downfall. But in spite of all these dangers, the necessity of applying the survival test compels the man who is naturally dogmatic to be somewhat less so, and helps the man who is naturally objective to be somewhat more so. It is a restraint upon the man who does not want to have to prove his points ; it is an assistance to the man who does.

This change in modes of thought and criteria of ethics did not come suddenly. It was far easier for popular writers to seize upon certain results of Darwin's thinking and try to apply them to history in the form of rhetorical analogies than it was to get at the Darwinian habit of mind in dealing with historical problems in general. Herbert Spencer's writings furnish a very marked instance of this error. Spencer's style was so felicitous and his works were so widely read that he did a good deal to retard the application of the really important results of Darwin's work to political thinking. Spencer and his followers made much of the conception of society as an organism ; but they overlooked the fact that historians had been treating society as an organism for more than two thousand years. In the belief

that they had occupied a new field, they permitted themselves to employ a number of loose analogies, in total ignorance of the fact that competent observers had already gone over much of the ground by scientific methods. Historians had been proving which forms of social life *did* survive; and this proof, defective or uncertain as it was in many instances, was yet better than the guesses of the Spencerian, on the basis of remote analogy, as to which forms of social life *were going to* survive. When Spencer pronounced evolution good or bad according as it did or did not 'proceed from an incoherent indefinite homogeneity to a coherent definite heterogeneity,' he was writing down in large letters the fact that he was born a good while before *The Origin of Species* had appeared. He had put on a few of the external attributes of the modern biologist; that was all. The hands were the hands of Esau, but the voice was the voice of Jacob. Or, to take an instance from a different field, when W. K. Clifford, in his now almost forgotten *Lectures and Essays*, proclaimed the right and duty of the unlimited exercise of private judgment, and called down anathemas on the head of every man who wished to exercise his own private judgment to the extent of differing from Mr. W. K. Clifford in this particular, he simply showed that he lived too early to have felt the full effect of *The Origin of Species* in leading people to substitute objective criteria for subjective ones.

But it would perhaps be toward the purpose to give instances of writers who were influenced by Darwin, instead of those who were not.

Among English economists, the man who was quickest to feel the force of the new movement was Walter Bagehot. Bagehot's Darwinian ideas are popularly known from his *Physics and Politics* — an interesting and often exceedingly brilliant set of conjectures regarding the operation of survival in prehistoric periods. But Bagehot's main work and main interest were always in the nearer parts of history, and particularly economic history, rather than the remoter parts. He it was who, in an age when England still followed John Stuart Mill blindly, first questioned the general admissibility of Mill's assumptions. In these twentieth century days, when competition is regarded,

not as an axiom or postulate of political economy, but simply as an important incident in its development, it is difficult for us to understand the courage that was involved forty years ago in publishing two critical essays in which competition was regarded, not as a standard to which all things must conform, but as one among several alternative phases or modes of social service, whose relative claims were to be investigated and relative merits judged by their applicability to given conditions. In this mental attitude the English writer who has followed Bagehot most closely is W. J. Ashley, whose *English Economic History* may be taken as furnishing a clear exemplification of Darwin's influence upon the methods of modern economic thought.

Meantime a German investigator in economics, Adolf Wagner, of Berlin, had been taking up Darwinian methods on a larger scale and applying them with conspicuous success. Wagner may be said to have developed his Darwinism at the opposite end from Bagehot. Bagehot had been brought up in the methods of the deductive school of economics, and was impressed with their inapplicability; Wagner had been accustomed to the methods of the historical school of economics, and was impressed with their inconclusiveness. While Bagehot wanted to make his analysis broad enough to fit different kinds of facts, Wagner was concerned to make his synthesis coherent enough to bring him to some positive proofs and conclusions. Wagner's treatment of the theory of property right is a good example of his philosophical method. He rejects both the crude juristic theory that property right is based upon occupancy and the equally crude philosophic theory that it ought to be based on labor. Society has established property right because it has shown itself the best motive—in fact, apparently the necessary motive—in order to get industry well and efficiently managed. It is only by the application of this last theory that you can make a connection between what is and what ought to be; between your history and economics on the one hand and your law and ethics on the other. If the philosopher says that property ought to be based upon labor, the jurist can laugh at him. If the jurist says that property is based upon occupancy or upon the constitution of society, the philosopher can say that the

occupants are bad men and that the sooner society changes its constitution the better. But if property is an institution which has survived while other forms of social organization have failed, because property preserves nations and socialism destroys them, then socialism is disproved by the logic of events — the logic that Darwin has taught us to apply to problems of this kind.

It is, however, not so much in its special applications that the Darwinian theory has affected modern political science as in the general habit of mind which it has fostered and cultivated. It has not led to many great discoveries which can be set apart from the general run of facts previously known; but it has led to changes in the methods of judgment which enable us to understand and use all historical facts in a more objective way.

A few years ago, when Dr. Jowett was master of Balliol, there was a discussion concerning two men who had attained high position at an early age. One of them had become a bishop, the other a judge; and the conversation turned on the respective merits of the two careers. One of the dons said, "I prefer the bishop. The judge can only say, 'You be hanged'; the bishop can say, 'You be damned.'" "Yes," said Dr. Jowett, sententiously, "but when the judge says 'You be hanged' *you are hanged*." The influence of Charles Darwin on historical and political thought may be summed up by saying that he has made our historians cease to aspire to be bishops and content themselves with the more modest but also more effective position of judges. For broad principles of judgment which they could not apply effectively they have substituted narrower but clearer ones whose application can be made evident to their fellow men.

I have spoken of this attitude of mind as having been foreshadowed in the works of Edmund Burke. To him, as to the modern thinker, human history was the record of a process of elimination and survival. To him political institutions and political ideas had grown up as a means of preserving the race that held them. And to him also it was unwarrantable to attempt to tear down on *a priori* grounds beliefs and methods that had preserved the race that held them, unless you were able to substitute something practically better in their place. A thing

did not seem to him correct which was logically good and practically bad. He suspected a defect in the logic. Was he right or wrong? In the first half of the nineteenth century the majority of men would have said that he was from a theoretical standpoint wrong. They admired his insight into the political conditions of his day, but they would have none of his theories. To-day the world feels a little less sure about some of his individual judgments than it did at the time when they were uttered; but as a matter of theory it has accepted his method as a sound one. It is in general prepared to make survival a test of right.

This is Darwin's contribution to political science; and the completeness with which this contribution is accepted is shown by the sudden cessation of public interest in books which do not apply or accept that test. Students of politics no longer read either Hegel or Comte. Buckle's *History of Civilization*, which in the years immediately following its appearance had a greater success than Darwin's *Origin of Species*, is now known only to a few specialists in literary history. Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* is valued for its contributions to the theory of banking; but as a work of political philosophy it has lost the place which its author, modest man though he was, confidently claimed for it.

We can get a curious idea of the kind of change which has taken place by comparing two works which are closely akin, by two men who were closely associated—Mill on *Liberty* and Morley on *Compromise*. The two writers deal with nearly the same topic. They approach it with nearly the same prepossessions. They arrive at almost exactly the same practical conclusions. Yet Morley is read to-day, and Mill, speaking broadly, is not. Why? Because Mill is constantly referring things to a subjective standard, and Morley to an objective one. Mill's whole argument is essentially an *argumentum ad hominem*, even when it takes the form of an appeal to experience; Morley's an appeal to experience, even when it takes the form of an *argumentum ad hominem*.

We may not be any more correct in our political reasoning than our fathers. I dare say that when the world contrasts the political philosophy of to-day with that of a generation or two

ago it will reprove us for our crude judgments and for the irreverence with which we have cast aside work that was better than our own because it did not reach its results by our methods. But we are at least trying as no previous generation has tried to get *objective* standards on which different men and different ages can agree; and for this effort, and for whatever measure of success it has attained, we may thank Charles Darwin.

